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ABSTRACT

The use of error pattern analysis can reduce the time and money spent on editing and correcting manuscripts. What is required is noting, classifying, and keeping a frequency count of errors. First an editor should take a typical page of writing and circle each error. After the editor has done a sufficiently large number of pages to identify an error pattern, the errors can be arranged in categories, alphabetically, and assigned numbers such as (1) awkward syntax, (2) choice of word, (3) lack of colon for lists and definitions, and so forth. While it is possible for authors to make a wide variety of errors, they actually make only a few, and these they repeat. Commas may be a special problem because of the large number of subcategories and rules governing them. In this instance the editor can simplify terms and produce subcategories such as (4a), (4b), and so on. Once a pattern and numbering system are established, the editor can simply circle an error and place a number above it. The authors can then refer to the rules cited on a master sheet of the most common errors that would accompany their papers. This list becomes a nameless and faceless expert, a "third part," that can prevent some of the confrontations that occasionally arise between a writer and an editor. The most important aspect of error pattern analysis is that it reduces what seems to be a thicket of possible errors to a relatively small list of those that people actually make. (HOD)

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ERROR PATTERN ANALYSIS APPLIED TO TECHNICAL WRITING:

AN EDITOR'S GUIDE FOR WRITERS

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

This paper uses error pattern analysis to reduce the time and money spent on editing and correcting manuscripts. Error pattern analysis involves noting, classifying, and keeping a frequency count on errors. Once this pattern is identified, an editor can assign a number to each error. Lengthy manuscript notations are thus eliminated because errors are circled and given a number. The writer, upon receiving his edited manuscript, can refer to a Master List of Most Common Errors, which lists each numbered error and the rules for correcting it. Results from error pattern analysis can save writers and editors both time and money.

AN OPTIMISTIC BEGINNING

As the newly-employed graduate school editor, I looked forward to a rather easy time of editing. I knew I had time limitations, of course. Once submitted, theses and dissertations had to be checked and returned within ten working days. Further, there were particularly busy periods.

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The month I had been hired, over thirty theses and dissertations had required editing in an eighty-hour period. Mentally, I did a rapid calculation. If each thesis and dissertation had minimum of 50 pages, an editor would have to edit 1,500 pages and possibly 3,000 pages if all the pages had to be rechecked. But even with these figures, I wasn't alarmed.

After all, weren't all the writers advanced students? Some of them had as many as five years of graduate schooling. Besides the editorial guidelines had no section on mechanics and style, thus further supporting my belief that the writers didn't require any assistance in these areas. (I found information on such points as prepage format, proper bibliographical form, documentation in the text, correct pagination, and so forth in the editorial guidelines.) Surely a section would have been included on the most common mechanical errors, if many of the writers were making them.

A QUICK AWAKENING

But I found mechanical errors and, in some cases, a large number of them. I tackled the job with enthusiasm, circling each error and citing the rule it broke (as briefly as possible, of course.) But the system was cumbersome because the edited copy had to be returned to the author and a second copy had to be made for the editor's files. I slipped into the desperate feeling of racing against the clock and knowing I was losing.

SOME POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVES

How could I deal with the problem? Since I was working many hours past the time I was being paid for, I began to search for alternative solutions. Perhaps I could "nod with Homer" and overlook some of the more minor errors.

But when faced with that choice, I rejected it. Since these papers were going to be published, it was important not to "let go." Could I simply circle an error and correct it without explanation? No, that wasn't the way either. Certainly it would save time, but frequently writers objected instinctively to such high-handed ways of dealing with their "babies." What if I just circled the error and returned it to the author for corrections? Before I had even finished framing this alternative, I could see its flaw. Would an author have written an error, if he had known what rule he was breaking?

AN EMERGING PATTERN

I began to notice certain errors were being repeated over and over, and an idea began to form in my mind. To test this idea, I ran an error pattern analysis, which meant simply circling, noting, and classifying errors under their respective categories. Even I was surprised when I had finished. I had expected to find a small number of types of errors, but not so few as I actually did. In all, there were approximately 18 classes, which can be classified as follows:

- Awkward Syntax
- Choice of Word
- Lack of Colon for Lists and Definitions
- Lack of Conditional Verb
- Lack of Hyphen in Compound Nouns/Adjectives
- Lack of Parallelism in Infinitives
- Lack of Parralelism in Sentences
- Misplaced Modifier

- Not Spelling Out Numbers Ten and Below
- Ommitted/Incorrectly Placed Comma
- Omitted Word/Words
- Overcapitalization/and Undercapitalization
- Subject-Verb Agreement
- Typographical Error*
- Unidiomatic Preposition
- Use of Adverb for Pronoun (Where for Which)
- Use of Verb as a Noun (Affect/Effect)
- Use of Noun as a Verb (Effect/Affect)
- Use of Verb for Adjective (the Return Check)

In addition, within these classes of errors, the majority of errors, 80 percent, were in the placement of commas, the lack of hyphens with compound nouns and adjectives, and the failure of spelling out numbers of ten and below. And approximately 50 percent of all errors were in the category of comma usage alone.

The results of this analysis supported what I had intuitively sensed. While it is possible for authors to make a wide variety of errors, they actually made only a few, and these they continued to repeat.

*I broadened the category of typos to include misspelled words which is discretionary, of course. Some editors might not want to call a Jack of Hearts the King of Clubs.

PUTTING THE FINDINGS TO USE

Now that I had put my idea to the test, I needed a way to put it to practical use, especially to a time-saving use. What if I assigned a number to each of these classes of errors, such as (1) subject-verb agreement, (2) lack of hyphens with compound nouns/and adjectives, (3) omitted word/words, (4) use of verb for adjective, and so forth? In one quick stroke, I could cut out wordy, written notations. I could also do away with some of the editorial symbols, many of which were unfamiliar to authors.

Simultaneously, this method provided me with a substitute for the cumbersome record-keeping used formerly. Now all that was needed was to transfer the numbered error and its page number to another page for the editor's files. Finally and most important, I realized I had found a way to eliminate the flashpoint of confrontation that can occasionally arise between a writer and editor. By introducing a "third party," a nameless and faceless expert whose grammatical rules and references could be cited on the Master Sheet of Most Common Errors, I could do away with the difficult editor role which few editors relish.

DOING AN ERROR PATTERN ANALYSIS

Excerpt from Student X's Dissertation

Folklore, misinformation, religious beliefs, and emotional outlook may influence sexual appetities in the pregnant woman far more than anatomic and physiological variables, which will be described later. In the early

part of pregnancy, women who report less sexual tension than they did before becoming pregnant, may be fearful of harming the fetus, feel insecure in their changing relationship with their husband, or have new personal anxieties or concerns.

From these and other pages, categories of errors were set up, numbers assigned to them, and tallies kept of errors.

SOME COMMA PROBLEMS

However, I hadn't gone very far before I could see commas were going to be a special problem. It wasn't enough to assign a number to them, cite a rule, and give a brief example because within the comma category were large numbers of sub-categories and rules governing them.

Moreover, the question of length had to be considered. A typical grammar book, such as Warriner's English Grammar and Composition (Third Course), spent as many as 20 pages on comma rules, explanations, and examples. To reproduce such a mass of material would be self-defeating. Would anyone be likely to read through as many pages? Even if they did, many of the terms would be difficult to understand. This problem can best be seen by citing, in a condensed version, the seven basic categories for comma use from Warriner's grammar text.

1. Use commas to separate items in a series.

   Example: Students, teachers, parents, and visitors attended the picnic.

2. Use a comma to separate two or more adjectives preceding a noun.

Example: This is a rough, narrow, dangerous road.

3. Use a comma before and, but, or, nor, for, and yet when you have two independent clauses (two complete thoughts on either side of your conjunction).

   Example: He did not come to my birthday, nor did he even bother to answer the invitation.

So far, so good. The definitions are simply stated, and the terms easy enough to understand, particularly when accompanied by an example. However, the remaining four rules have sub-categories and use some grammatically technical language.

4. Use a comma to set off non-essential clauses and non-essential participial phrases.

   Example: The National Bank, which was a firetrap, was torn down.

5. Use a comma after certain introductory elements.

   a. Use a comma after such words as well, yes, no, why, etc. when they begin a sentence.

      Example: No, I have not answered her letter.

   b. Use a comma after an introductory participial phrase.

      Example: Pausing for a moment in the doorway, the teacher smiled.

   c. Use a comma after a succession of introductory prepositional phrases.

      Example: After Alexander had hit the ball over the fence, the crowd gave him a standing ovation.

6. Use commas to set off elements that interrupt the sentence.

a. Appositives and appositive phrases are usually set off by commas.

Example: Everyone, even his enemies, respects him.

b. Words used in direct address are set off by commas.

Example: That program, Florence, has been changed.

c. Parenthetical expressions are set off by commas.

Example: He did not, however, keep his promise.

7. Use a comma in certain conventional situations.

a. Items in dates and addresses are set off by commas.

Example: My family moved to Knoxville, Tennessee, on Monday, May 4, 1964.

b. The salutation from a friend's letter and the closing of a letter both use commas.

Example: Dear Aunt Edith, Sincerely,

c. Names followed by Jr., Sr., M.D., etc. are followed by commas.

Example: Allen Davis, Jr.

The problem becomes clear when rules four through seven are cited; the terms, non-essential clauses, non-essential participial phrases, introductory participial phrases, a succession of introductory prepositional phrases, and so forth, are too technical. In addition the sub-categories and sub-definitions were too numerous. I knew I would lose the writer's attention if I didn't condense this material.

The question was, could I simplify the terms and categories without sacrificing accuracy? After studying the types of errors writers actually made, I thought I could.

Rule six could easily be combined into number four to read as follows: use commas with elements that interrupt the flow of a sentence or separate the subject and verb.

Example: The National Bank, which was a firetrap, was torn down.

Senator Morgan, hoping for a compromise, began a filibuster.

Rule five can be restated in simpler language yet maintain its meaning: use commas after introductory phrases and clauses and such adverbs as however, therefore, and nevertheless.

Example: While driving the car in the wintertime, I often forget to check the antifreeze level. Nevertheless, I've always been lucky and never damaged a car yet.

Rule seven would become rule six and, since it is not stated too technically, it would stay the same.

HOW ERROR PATTERN ANALYSIS CAN WORK FOR YOU

You, as an editor, would take a typical page of writing and circle each error as was done with Student X's paper. After you had done a sufficiently large number of pages to identify an error pattern, you would arrange these errors in categories, alphabetically, and assign numbers to the categories as follows: (1) Awkward Syntax, (2) Choice of Word, (3) Lack of Colon for Lists and Definitions, and so forth. With commas, of course, you would need sub-categories such as (4a), (4b), (4c), etc. Once you had established your pattern and numbering system, you can then simply circle an error and place a number above it. The authors would then refer to the rules cited on the Master Sheet of the Most Common Errors, which accompanies their papers.

For example, a writer might find on page 3, line 6, a word circled with (3) above it. He would refer to the Master Sheet, which gives all the

common errors and the rules for correcting them. He would find, by referring to (3), that he had left out a colon for a list and that it contained the rules for colons.

A Master Sheet with all the most frequent errors categorized and numbered simplifies bookkeeping. It allows you to reduce your record of an edited paper to a few pages because you can simply list errors by page, line, and number [p 1, line 16, (3)].

Finally, it is often helpful to send a prospective author an advance copy of this Master Sheet of Most Common Errors and the rules for them. I found authors frequently read the editorial guidelines carefully; they were anxious to avoid pitfalls and had this list been drawn up, I believe the error frequency would have gone down sharply.

The most important aspect of error pattern analysis is that it reduces what seems to be a thicket of possible errors to a relatively small list of those people actually make. Your list might not look exactly like mine. You might also disregard some of the errors, such as parallel infinitives, as being relatively unimportant.

Though doing an error pattern analysis for your writers takes a little time and work in the beginning, it saves a lot of time and work in the end.